



## Article

# Grassroots Roma Women Organizing for Social Change: A Study of the Impact of ‘Roma Women Student Gatherings’

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**Abstract:** Scientific literature has focused on the constraints that Roma women have faced to overcome the racism and inequalities that they and the Roma people as a whole have suffered. However, less attention has been paid to how Roma women organize to challenge this reality. Drawing on a qualitative case study about the Roma Association of Women Drom Kotar Mestipen (Barcelona) and specifically on the analysis of one of its activities, the ‘Roma women student gatherings’ (known as ‘Trobades’ in Catalan), this article contributes evidence to show how Roma women are fighting to improve their own living conditions and those of their people by organizing at the grassroots level. The communicative analysis reveals the impacts that these gatherings have on the individual and societal levels. First, the gatherings have impacts on the individual level, as many of the women who participate in them are exposed to and embrace new educational projects, thus acquiring more skills to be better prepared to later access the labor market. Second, their impact is also evidenced on the societal level, as the gatherings enhance Roma women’s associational life, resulting in new mobilizations and often making women who were once in the shadows become community leaders.

**Keywords:** Roma women; inequalities; grassroots organizing; social inclusion; Roma feminism

## 1. Introduction

Although several authors have recognised the role of Roma women as agents of social transformation within the Roma community [1–5], research still needs to better identify and explain the specific ways in which grassroots Roma women are working for their individual and collective empowerment while shaping a more inclusive feminism that listens to the voices of all women in an egalitarian way. Instead of being spectators of their social reality, Roma women are becoming agents of transformation. Otherwise, how can it be possible that every year there are more grassroots Roma women who join social mobilization in their local communities to find better ways to improve their own futures and those of their families? An example of this is the second International Conference of Roma Women, organized in Barcelona in 2018, which gathered approximately 300 Roma women from 16 European different countries to debate and build networks of solidarity to find a common way out of poverty and advocate for their rights. For many of these women, going to Barcelona meant leaving their hometowns and flying in a plane for the first time in their lives. These efforts were exerted in order to meet other Roma women from different national and cultural contexts who also deal with similar burdens in their daily lives derived from anti-gypsyism.

This article is derived from one of the authors' PhD dissertation, which aimed to study and describe the outcomes of Roma women's collective agency when successfully organized [6]. The dissertation research was part of a broader line of research on the Roma people and their overcoming of inequality, which is led by another of the authors and in which all of the authors participate. Using as a theoretical approach the dual theories in sociology allows analysing the course of social change as an interaction among systems and subjects [7–11]. In this vein, this paper examines how agents, by means of interactions, either change or reproduce social structures. Habermas' [7,8] concept of the 'lifeworld' enables us to capture the richness of the transformative potential of Roma women's interactions in their daily lives and within all the social spaces in which they are engaged.

Therefore, in this article, we focus on presenting and discussing one specific activity organized by the Roma Association of Women Drom Kotar Mestipen, namely, the intergenerational Roma women student gatherings, or 'Trobades' (the Catalan name), to better understand how Roma women are leading transformations at the grassroots level and the impact their actions have not only on their own lives but also on those of their people and on the course of Roma feminism. The distinguishing trait of this association and the Roma women students' gatherings is that they are organized and run by a group who we define as 'grassroots Roma women', who have been triply discriminated against: for being women, for being Roma, and for having low educational levels and lacking educational certificates [12–15]. As for other ethnic minority women—such as Muslim women [16] or indigenous women [17]—for Roma women, their ethnicity, their socioeconomic status, and, in some cases, their migrant background intersect with their gender, resulting in a myriad of inequalities that they have to confront.

In this article, we contribute to the scientific literature in the field of Roma and women's studies. We do so by providing evidence of how these "other" Roma women, to use Puigvert's terminology, are shaping a Roma feminism that is inclusive and aligned with dialogic feminism [14,18,19]. In turn, they are opening up new opportunities for women and being a force for social change for all Roma people.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. Roma Women Organizing for Social Change

Roma women are frequently portrayed in the mainstream media and 'exclusionary research' as subordinate to Roma men and displaced to the private sphere. However, Roma women are leading many processes of change within their families and communities by building a discourse around a Roma feminist identity [14,20] and by using education to challenge gender relations and overcome inequality [21]. An example of this is the increasing participation of Roma women in public spaces to defend their rights by condemning, for instance, any type of racist attack that occurs in Europe against Roma communities; another example is the explosion of scientific work that has examined this social reality and revealed the diversity of the Roma women's movement [15].

Straddling tradition and modernity, Roma women are changing gender and family relations and the way in which Roma women's identity is understood, and their access to formal education is a major part of this process [1,4,21]. These transformative dynamics are found in their individual lives and in their civic associations, which have rapidly increased in recent decades throughout the world.

Recent investigations that have focused on illuminating the ways in which Roma women are leading multiple transformations have departed from the past historical perspectives from which Roma studies were traditionally carried out. Two of the perspectives that have conditioned how Roma women transformations have been depicted are ethnocentrism and relativism [22]. On the one hand, ethnocentrism is based on the idea that some cultures are more advanced than others. Studies from this perspective have often portrayed Roma people as naturally disengaged from mainstream society, as having a natural tendency to commit crime, or as not being interested in working or in education, among other prejudices [23–25]. On the other hand, the relativist perspective has also occasionally been used in some studies that have focused on Roma identity and Roma women. In these studies, the

results tend to reinforce an exotic and essentialist image of Roma women, always from the perspective of the non-Roma world, considering any step that has been achieved to just be a mirage that does not have a real basis [26,27].

To incorporate the contributions of many agents to the topic discussed, it is necessary to move beyond these previous perspectives to a third viewpoint, the dialogic perspective. This perspective has emerged from an increasing dialogic turn that has been experienced in both societies and the social sciences and that has already been observed in different disciplines [28–30] as a response to modernization processes, which have increased uncertainty while introducing and providing more and better life choices [9,10]. In turn, traditions, gender roles, and access to education are also being discussed within the Roma community and in Roma families [31,32], and Roma women are at the center of these discussions [33,34]. The action that grassroots Roma women are taking in their communities by establishing alliances with other women and other actors can be better analyzed and understood from this dialogic perspective. Hence, Roma women can be considered the main protagonists of the changes that are taking place among the Roma people.

## 2.2. *Opening the Way Towards a More Inclusive Feminism*

Recent data published by the Fundamental Rights Agency in its Fundamental Rights Report 2018 shows that the situation of the Roma in the EU in 2017 had not improved compared with their situation in the previous year and that hate-motivated crime and harassment continued to be a barrier for Roma inclusion. In 2016, 80% of the Roma remained at risk of poverty, and although early childhood education enrolment increased up to 53% on average, early school dropout remained a problem, especially among Roma girls. Thus, the situation is often worse for women. For instance, the rate of individuals aged 14–16 years old who were not in employment, education or training (the NEET rate) was much higher for women than for men.

While anti-gypsyism affects the Roma in general, it has a worse impact on Roma women, who still face intersectional inequality due to [at least] their ethnicity, gender and class [1]. The low educational levels and, in many cases, illiteracy of Roma women introduce additional hindrances for them compared to other working-class women. Feminist scholar Lúcia Puigvert [18] has called non-academic (referring to those with neither higher education nor university credentials) women “other women”. These “other women” have traditionally suffered discrimination based on their gender, as well as on their lack of educational credentials, which has led them to face unequal power relations. “Other women” have claimed access to democratic spaces of decision-making from which they have traditionally been excluded. This in order to be able to participate in feminist debates on equal footing with well-educated women and to present their demands. The mainstreaming of other women’s voices into feminism through the creation of spaces for dialogue and debate has generated what is known as “dialogic feminism” [18].

As Sordé [4] states, dialogic feminism constitutes a common ground from which to analyze the action of Roma women, including their own contributions to feminism. Sánchez-Aroca [19] noted some elements present in the dialogic-based “Roma feminism”. Some of these elements have also been mentioned by other Roma women scholars as strong cultural values of Roma women, which they claim and want to maintain as both Roma and feminists. The Roma place great value on close family ties, a core element in their identity [33]. Accordingly, the key role of the extended family and its unity, respect for and centrality of elders are all cultural aspects of the Roma identity that are also present in Roma feminism. Elder Roma women, because of their ample experience and wisdom, have much to contribute to the community [19]. The search for dialogue and agreement is not only a trait of the Roma culture, which is historically based on oral tradition, but also a characteristic of Roma feminism: the progress of Roma women is achieved by reaching agreements through dialogue and by constructing alliances with other agents, such as Roma men and non-Roma women. In this vein, Vincze emphasized that Roma feminism empowered her to create networks in which there were not only Roma women but also non-Roma women and men: “working to solve immediate, practical problems,

but also to broadly conceptualise societal issues ( ... ) Roma feminism is a process of permanently (re)creating solidarities around universal human rights” [1] (pp. 45–46).

Therefore, analyzing the gatherings from a dialogic perspective with a focus on the grassroots association Drom Kotar Mestipen while acknowledging the particularities of Roma feminism provides a theoretical framework that allows us to examine the agency of grassroots Roma women and the potential of their organized collective action.

### 3. Materials and Methods

The research presented in this article was part of a PhD thesis investigation conducted between 2012 and 2016; it is framed within a broader research project on the overcoming of inequalities faced by the Roma people in which the four authors, who are of both non-Roma and Roma origin, have participated.

The research consisted of a case study of a grassroots association, the Roma Association of Women Drom Kotar Mestipen; the case study was conducted employing the communicative methodology of research [28]. The case was defined as an instrumental case study following Stake’s classification [35]. This is because by studying the concrete case of a Roma Association of Women, the investigation aimed to embrace a broader endeavor: understanding how organizing occurs to foster and enable grassroots Roma women to exercise their human agency to both eradicate discrimination and engage in a process of individual while collective empowerment.

The communicative methodology of research, which guided the research, is a methodological approach characterised by its dialogic orientation that has been widely recognised for its transformative potential [36,37]. This methodology is a tool to “explain, understand, and interpret social situations which aims at changing society, -driven by utopian dreams of equality and justice” [28] (p. 237). The previous literature has analyzed in-depth the reasons why this methodology is effective in contributing to the scientific, social and political impact of research results, outlining the suitability of these methods to conduct studies with the Roma [36]. This literature highlights that the strength of this approach relies on two aspects: the premises of the communicative methodology itself and the methodological strategies that are used to include the voices of the ‘researched’ subjects as key elements to generate new knowledge and inform social change. In this vein, the inclusion of research subjects as part of the research team can serve as a means to ensure that the voices of researched communities are taken into account since doing so is one way to depart from the conception of researched subjects as mere objects of investigation. Another strategy implemented in communicative investigations consists of the creation of ad hoc advisory councils, which are consultancy bodies that represent the voices of vulnerable social groups on which studies are focused in all phases of research [38].

In line with the abovementioned research approaches, all the authors of this article have been involved with the Roma community and have been working hand in hand with the Roma women within the Drom Kotar Mestipen association since the beginning of their academic careers. By participating as volunteers and members of the association with an equal footing as other Roma women members, the authors have built bond of trust with the Roma community in the city and spaces in which the association participates. This has been an asset for the association itself, as the activities implemented are widely based on existing scientific evidence of ‘what works’ in the promotion of women’s access to education or employment. In turn, it has enriched and provided a valuable inner perspective for the authors’ understanding and comprehension of Roma needs and how they need to be addressed taking into account Roma cultural traits and identity. In addition, being one of the authors Roma herself, has enabled an on-going dialogue to capture the structural constraints faced by the Roma community as well as the efforts made to overcome them. Oriented by the communicative research methodology, the process of knowledge creation within the extensive line of research lies in the continuous intersubjective egalitarian dialogue between both researchers and the researched agents.

### 3.1. Data Collection

Data collection was performed using different methods, ranging from fieldwork carried out specifically for the investigation to the collection of secondary documentation and archival records (grey literature) from the DKM.

Secondary documentation and archival records became one of the main sources of evidence. Specifically, annual reports submitted by DKM to justify funding for the different projects it had led and minutes for the meetings and assemblies since 1999 were consulted. Additionally, secondary documentation issued by Roma organizations that was provided by DKM was also reviewed. Other information, such as documentation available on the DKM website and other European Roma associations, was also consulted.

In relation to the fieldwork, the participants in the case study were selected according to their profiles and their relations to and roles in the DKM and its activities. Accordingly, three groups were identified: members, the community of participants and women who represented the Roma women's associations that collaborate with DKM. See Table 1 below:

**Table 1.** Fieldwork Participants.

Group	Rationale for Selection	Description of Profile
<b>Group A.</b> DKM members (6 Roma women and 5 non-Roma women).	These women agree and believe in the association's objectives and participate in its activities in different ways; they also attend the association's assemblies on a regular basis.	<i>Characteristic profile of the Roma women:</i> This group includes women from middle and low SES backgrounds and with a diversity of ages; three of the women have completed university degrees, and the others have primary education or secondary education. Two of them are non-Spanish: one is American, and one is Romanian. They also have diverse religious beliefs.
		<i>Characteristic profile of the non-Roma women:</i> This group includes women of a diversity of ages and middle SES backgrounds; all of the women have completed university. Most of them work within the field of education and social services.
<b>Group B.</b> DKM community of participants (15 Roma women)	These Roma women who have participated and/or are engaged in the DKM's activities (Intergenerational Roma Women Students' Meeting; Romi Training; EU-Projects' Activities; 1st International Roma Women Congress). They were selected according to the diversity of their profiles to include women of different ages who have participated in the different editions of the different activities. These women were contacted through Group A (members of DKM).	<i>Characteristic profile:</i> These women can be categorized into two groups: (1) those from very low SES backgrounds who lack academic training and are in difficult economic situations, have a family economy in the formal or informal sector, and have family responsibilities and (2) women from low-middle SES backgrounds who have completed middle or upper training programmes and are currently working and whose personal economic situations, although difficult, are more stable. Other young Roma women who have completed their training internships in the association were also included in this group.
<b>Group C.</b> Women who represent the Roma women's associations that collaborate with DKM (4 women)	These women were selected to participate in the study foremost to represent members of other Roma women's associations with which DKM has collaborations.	<i>Characteristic profile:</i> This group includes 4 women of different backgrounds: 3 of them have similar backgrounds as the women from Group B and actually can be considered part of the community of DKM participants. The other woman is non-Roma and has academic training. She is a representative member of the Federation of Associations of Roma Women, Kamira.

Source: Aiello, 2006.

Several qualitative data collection techniques were employed: communicative observations, communicative daily life stories, interviews and communicative focus groups, which were used for the validation of the findings. A brief description of each technique is provided below:

Communicative observation was one of the research techniques used to address issues related to the strategies and actions developed by DKM, as well as the mechanisms that operate behind the Roma women's mobilizations. A total of eight communicative observations were carried out: two regarding the Roma women student gatherings (Campclar, Tarragona in June 2013 and Terrassa in



November 2016) and six regarding specific assemblies of DKM that took place between January 2014 and January 2015.

Observations of the Roma women student gatherings were aimed at understanding the organization and development of the sessions, focusing especially on two moments of the events: the positive role models' roundtable (Roma women explaining their experience as students and engaging in a dialogue with the rest of the participants) and the group work sessions. For the gathering organized in Campclar (June 2013), the discussion in the group work session was focused on how to increase the participation of Roma families in school, the barriers that deter family engagement and the actions that can promote engagement. In the case of the gathering organized in Terrassa in November 2016, the attention was focused on identifying the differences compared with the one in Campclar (e.g., how local organizers were involved, participant interest in the topics discussed, and the presence of more diverse participants), and highlighting the increasing number of women who are moved to participate year after year.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to distinguish between two participant profiles. Five of the interviews were carried out with non-Roma women DKM members (one of them was a collaborator of the association) to gain insight into the overall functioning of the association and better contextualise the study. In addition, two interviews were conducted with women who represented the Roma women's associations that collaborate with DKM (Roma and non-Roma women). The interviews were semi-structured, lasted approximately 45 min to 1 h and were tape recorded and later transcribed.

Communicative daily life stories (CDLSs) were used with two different groups of participants: Roma DKM members (Group A) and women from the community of DKM participants (Group B). Two different protocols were elaborated (open and indicative, according to the level of analysis).

Unlike a regular life story, in a communicative daily life story, the researcher and the researched subject engage in a dialogic process in which both of them set their own premises on how to more deeply explore their respective lifeworlds. This enables the researcher to access the researched subject's understanding of his or her own lifeworld and, through a joint intersubjective dialogue, compare the lifeworld to the present-day theoretical debate [28,39].

Finally, one communicative focus group with Roma and non-Roma women DKM members was conducted at the end of the research study to validate the results. In this focus group, the women were asked to give their opinions and express their feelings regarding the findings obtained. Under the framework of the communicative research methodology, the focus group contributed to the validation of the research results, putting the results of this research in dialogue with the voices of the researched subjects.

### 3.2. Data Analysis

Data analysis was an on-going process during the data collection phase. The gathered data were transcribed and, along with the notes from the observations and other documentation, analyzed according to four levels of analysis related to the broader research project: the association's organizing features, individual level, community level, and societal level.

For this article, we report solely the data related to the individual and societal levels of analysis. At the individual level, we examined the impact of the Roma women's collective agency on their own lives under the framework of the case study. At the societal level, we investigated the contributions of the Roma Association of Women to shaping and fostering the Roma women's movement at the grassroots level, i.e., in this study, the region of Catalonia.

In addition, following the communicative methodology, the analysis of the information was also conducted taking into account both systems and human agency, which in turn were categorised regarding the transformative and exclusionary dimension [40]. In this vein, all data constituting transformative evidence of the Roma women's agency (lifeworlds) were categorized in the transformative dimension, whereas all data that evidenced hindrances to Roma women's agency and its manifestation in the different levels of analysis were considered part of the exclusionary dimension.

### 3.3. The Case of the Roma Women's Association Drom Kotar Mestipen

The Roma Association of Women Drom Kotar Mestipen ('A road for freedom') was created in 1999 by a group of Roma and non-Roma women of different ages, academic backgrounds, professional profiles and socio-economic levels who pursued a common objective: to fight for the equality and non-discrimination of Roma women by promoting their participation in educational, social and cultural spaces. It was the first Roma women's association in Catalonia.

The DKM structure differs from what is known in the international literature as a paid staff non-profit organization (PSNPO) [41], as the association is mainly run by volunteers. In this sense, DKM relies on a wide network of volunteers, who are both Roma and non-Roma people and mainly women, but men also participate in some of its activities (especially those that require logistics or childcare while Roma women are participating in other activities). Therefore, few paid staff members are involved: DKM has between two and three people who work full time or part time who are in charge of doing the administrative tasks for the funded projects that the association has.

#### Roma Women Student Gatherings as a Defining DKM Activity

On 30 November 2001, Drom Kotar Mestipen organized the workshop "Roma women of Barcelona in the 21st Century". This event was celebrated in the Civic Center of Barceloneta in Barcelona, and more than 70 people attended it motivated by a common interest: working to ensure that "Roma women's voices were heard and taken into account in different social spaces, such as education, the labor market, health, and social participation" [42] (p. 108). This workshop was of upmost importance for DKM, as the idea of organizing intergenerational Roma women student gatherings ("Trobades d'estudiants gitanes de Catalunya") was officially validated. Although the first gathering had been carried out in Hospitalet in 2000 with just two participants (a Roma girl and her mother), the need and the importance to continue this activity was suggested and accepted in the Badalona workshop one year later.

The gatherings are intergenerational encounters of Roma girls and women, who are students, other workers or unemployed, as well as elderly Roma women. The final goal is to open up a space of dialogue in which all participants can share their multiple concerns about their own and their children's education, discussing the barriers that are faced within the educational system and which actions are needed in order to overcome them. This way, the gatherings are conceived as a space of meaning creation for those Roma girls who are still in school and often experience the burden of exclusionary educational systems, as well as to those who have dropped out. In this space, participants share conversations with other Roma women with successful trajectories, setting up high educational expectations for all.

The Roma women student gatherings are not held in the DKM headquarters; instead, they are normally held at a school in a neighborhood where there is a large Roma community and a group of Roma women who want to organize the action in their territory. Regarding the organization of the gatherings, DKM co-organizes them by providing support from the beginning to the 'chairing committee', which is composed of grassroots Roma women who have been encouraged to lead the event. DKM organizes a bus service throughout the Catalan territory to facilitate the attendance of women from different cities and neighborhoods to the event.

Each gathering is organized following a similar structure: the action begins with the presentation of the topic ('the problem'), which has been agreed upon by DKM members and the local organizers. Then, there is a round table with Roma girls and women who are positive role models to discuss their experiences. The women on the round table have outstanding educational or training careers and participate as role models in the meeting by sharing their stories with the girls and women who are in the audience. Next, the participants are divided into small groups to discuss the previously debated topics in workshops. Finally, to conclude the event, the insights and reflections of the workshops are recorded by a representative of each small group and finally presented as the conclusions of the meeting. These general conclusions inform and guide DKM advocacy agenda to work in the following

months with other allies (other NGOs or advocacy groups working with the Roma community, public institutions such as schools and local churches, political representatives, among others) in their pursue of the educational rights of all Roma girls and women, thus paving the road for their incorporation to the formal labor market.

A total of 17 Roma women students' gatherings have been held in Catalonia. The last one was in Terrassa in November 2015. In 2016 and 2017, the gatherings were not organized, as the association was involved in the organization of the 2nd International Conference of Roma women, which took place in Barcelona on 23–24 March 2018, gathering women from 16 European countries and 11 Spanish autonomous communities [43].

### 3.4. Ethics

This investigation complies with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU, and resolution P7\_TA 0312 of 9 September 2010, of the European Parliament on the Situation of the Roma People and Free Movement in the European Union [44,45].

To protect the participants' identities and personal data, pseudonyms have been used. Consent forms with detailed information about the study and an explanation that they have the right to withdraw from it at any time were provided to all the persons participating in the research.

## 4. Results

In this section, the findings regarding the impact of the Roma women student gatherings are presented and discussed. First, the impact at the individual level is examined, with in-depth exploration of two aspects: on the one hand, how the narratives and stories of the Roma women who participate as role models in the Roma women students' gatherings become tools for mobilising and connecting with the other women who are in the audience, calling them to join and to act as well, and on the other hand, how Roma women decide to embrace new educational projects after participating in the event. Second, the impact that the activity has on the societal level by means of activating the associational life of Roma women is explored and analyzed.

### 4.1. Examining the Impact of the Roma Women Students' Gathering at the Individual Level: The Power of Personal Narratives to Reach 'Other' Roma Women

Good morning, I'm Quimar, and I am delighted to be here with you all. Right now, I am a biologist, something that honestly makes me very proud of myself because the truth is that I had always wanted to go to university ... I always loved science and how science can be used to help people ( ... ) I would like to share with you a little bit about myself: I grew up in a poor family. No one except my aunt had continued education beyond compulsory studies, and unfortunately, she dropped out ( ... ) I will not say that everything has been a bed of roses and that studying has not meant a great effort because it has not been like this. But I assure you, the best decision I have ever made in my life is to keep studying ( ... ) And, you know what is the best of all? I have discovered that I like this new world [the world of the university] and what is even better, it is not irreconcilable with my Roma world ( ... ) Education does not make you less Roma, but more, as it makes you realise that your community is proud of you, as Roma ( ... ). (Quimar, Roma woman DKM member)

Quimar is now one of the youngest DKM members, and she participated as a role model in the Roma women student gathering celebrated in Terrassa in 2014. She made a speech that was full of hope, motivation and empathy with that was directed at the 'other Roma women'. Aware of the triple discrimination that Roma women suffer because of their family histories, in her speech, she talked about her own educational trajectory with the aim of motivating other Roma women to engage in education and encouraging girls to not drop out of school. As Quimar said, "Education does not make you less Roma, but more".



Another case is that of Aurora, aged 28, who learned about DKM through her friend one Sunday morning in the street market where both girls' parents worked. Aurora now holds a degree in law and a PhD in sociology, and she explained how nervous she was the first time she participated as a role model in a Roma women student gathering, namely, the gathering held in the neighborhood of Bon Pastor in 2012. Since then, she has become one of the most committed young Roma women activists in her territory, engaging some of her neighbors in DKM activities. She stressed how important it is for Roma girls to have positive role models:

( ... ) education represents the key to access multiple future opportunities. We the Roma need it as a way to overcome barriers such as discrimination or exclusion in the case of the Roma people. For me, it has been so important ... it has changed my life and the lives of those around me ... all of them are very proud of me ( ... ) for being a positive role model for other Roma who come after me. (Aurora, Roma woman DKM member)

Quimar and Aurora are examples of the positive role models who participate in the roundtables at the student gatherings. In the roundtables, usually four or five Roma women who have had successful educational or professional experiences share their personal stories, generating a dialogue with the other Roma who are in the audience and who ask them questions. Since 2000, by sharing their stories, many Roma women have not only shared their "story of self", as theorized by Ganz [46], but also engaged with the audience to explain "why they have been called to act" [46], that is, what has moved them to fight for their dreams and struggle for the rights of their people.

The experience of Tatiana and how she became involved with DKM after listening to Aurora (at the student gathering celebrated in El Bon Pastor, 2012) shows the transformative potential of the role models' narratives. This is observed when Tatiana explicates that after listening to the narratives she realized that if other poor Roma women had already succeeded in education, counting on the support of the community while accepting commitment with a challenge, she could as well. Besides, it is also appreciated when she acknowledges envisioning herself as being a role model someday for other girls and women:

When I attended the gathering in Bon Pastor in 2012 and I saw all the women there telling their stories, the story of Aurora and also the story of other women there ... when I saw all that, that made me feel so good ... I realized that I also could achieve it ( ... ) So, if other Roma women have been positive role models for me, I hope I can be one day a positive role model for other women in this neighborhood ... women that know me and know my situation ( ... ) We are working to improve the future of the Roma people, for the Roma women. (Tatiana, Roma woman DKM member)

Tatiana's final statement is very illustrative: "We are working to improve the future of the Roma people, for the Roma women". In the Roma women student gathering, the Freirean idea about people as "transformative beings and not beings for accommodation ( ... ) history is possibility and not determinism" is evident [47]. The stories of the women who have participated as role models have common elements that unite them. These common elements make other Roma women feel represented as well: the framework for collective action based on the triple discrimination faced by Roma women for being women, being Roma and traditionally having no access to formal education and, even more important, the transformative way of challenging this discrimination. These elements are also illustrated in the narrative of Sandra, a Roma woman aged 22 who participated as a role model in the 14th gathering in Bon Pastor in 2012:

( ... ) My referent has always been my mother ( ... ). When I'm doing my internship at the hospital and I have to interact with Roma people, they thank me, and they congratulate me because they see a Roma woman working at the hospital. In the future, I want to work at a hospital and demonstrate that it is not true what some people often say: "Look, she's a

Gypsy, she can't study". Yes, I'm Roma, and I'm very proud of it. I also want to say that when I finish my nursing studies and I get married, if God allows me, I also want to get a master's degree in midwifery. (Sandra, Roma woman)

Fighting for equality while preserving the value of family, which includes respect for the elderly, importance of caring for one's family members and values related to kinship solidarity, are some of the underlying elements included in the public narratives told and shared by grassroots Roma women in the gatherings. Embedded in these narratives is an idea that the women aim to explicate and disseminate among the wider community: that access to education is not at odds with the Roma identity and that the segregationist educational systems through which, unfortunately, many have gone have made them believe that the Roma "are not interested in education" [48]. In contrast to the idea that Roma are not interested in education, accessing quality education has enabled Roma women and their communities to have more tools to navigate the world and make their voices heard in mainstream society [34,49]. In all, these shared public narratives recognise the triple discrimination that Roma women suffer while calling them to engage in the mobilization and take the lead in their own change.

### Going Back to School ... Why Not Me? Embracing New Educational Challenges

The Roma women student gatherings have meant, for many of the participants, a space to discover that the 'fixed walls' once created by social structures can be contested and overcome. In the fieldwork conducted with Roma women, a common pattern was identified among them: the idea that education is not only the most powerful strategy to promote social inclusion but also the best way out of the poverty and social exclusion that many Roma people suffer. This aforementioned pattern is revealed, for instance, in the narratives of Carla and Tatiana, who participated in different student gatherings. They are Roma women who have family responsibilities and who have encountered barriers when accessing the labor market and graduating from school due to ethnic-related discrimination. Carla and Tatiana experienced educational segregation, racism during job seeking and no educational expectations from their schoolteachers. However, their involvement in Roma women's mobilizations triggered by their participation in the gatherings has been a turning point in their lives. Carla, who collaborated in the organization of the student gathering held in Figueres (Girona, Spain) in 2014 explained that this activity gave her the energy she needed to do that what she had wanted to do since she gave birth to her daughter, who has a disability, namely, a vocational training course in special education:

The student gathering has had a lot of impact on us. After it, because I have a daughter with a disability, I told myself, "Ok, why not? Why don't I study special education?" And so I did. I have finished a vocational training course in special education, and now I'm doing another one on social integration. And I'm doing the internship at the same school where we organized the gathering! But I'm not working yet ... (Carla, Roma woman)

Carla also explained that the other five women who were members of the chairing committee together with her decided to take an adult education course to prepare themselves to obtain the secondary education graduate diploma. After pursuing that, all of them have started new educational projects:

Other Roma women too, as a result of the gathering, began to take part in several activities. Five women that organized the gathering started a course to get the secondary school certificate, my aunt amongst them, and she was one of the most active ones. She is 42 years old; there are some younger girls ... (Carla, Roma woman)

The case of Tatiana, whose story was introduced in the previous section, is similar. While she was a secondary education student at the age of 16, she was segregated in her school along with those considered 'bad students'. She says that, instead of going to the school "to grow tomatoes" (the task

she was assigned while in school), she decided to drop out of school and go to the street market to help her mother and take care of her younger siblings:

At my school, we were sent to grow tomatoes every day ... we also had to paint the building; we did not progress ... And that discourages you ... Everybody? No, it affected only some of us. So then, I decided that in that case, I preferred to help my parents. I was 16 at the time ( ... ) (Tatiana, Roma woman)

Participating in the gathering in Bon Pastor, listening to the role models' stories and exchanging views with other women moved Tatiana to make a decision regarding her professional future. The next Monday after the gathering, she knocked on the door of the DKM headquarters to obtain more information about how she could go back to school. Tatiana is now one of the Roma women participating in a course organized by the Roma Integration Plan of the Catalan Government to prepare for the official university access exam for people over 25 years old:

At the time, when I attended the gathering in Bon Pastor in 2012 ( ... ) it made me realize that the world is like we see it and that we are the ones who create the barriers ... nobody else. Society and different situations can put obstacles on your path, but you can remove them if you want to. If you want to, you can take those barriers down. It was like a confirmation: "go this way!" ( ... ) Then, when the meeting was over, I ran looking for Ana: "Ana, Ana, Ana!!! We have to meet. I want to do things." Then, I started to get ready for the university-access exam for people over 25 years old. (Tatiana, Roma woman)

The stories of Carla, Tatiana and many other Roma women who participated in the different gatherings, which are spaces where egalitarian dialogic interactions are generated, reveal how these women experienced a process of empowerment that led them to recover their dreams that were once left behind. As all of the women mentioned, in the spaces generated by the gatherings and through the transformative interactions they had there, women who encountered similar situations found inspiration and the strength to embrace new personal projects.

#### 4.2. Roma Women Making Impacts at the Societal Level: The Activation of Associational Life

I make a comparison with dance. In dance, there is that moment of body–mind connection; it does not matter what has happened before and what will happen in the future, it is just that moment. And in DKM, I think that they cultivate the importance of being at that very moment, to be there. As you have attended today, that is perfect, that is enough ( ... ) And this, I think that it is very important to work with grassroots Roma women, because unfortunately, many of them have very difficult lives ... We need flexibility and to not be judged ... (Maria, Roma woman member of DKM)

Maria's words reflect very well how DKM conceives participation in the activities it organizes: a type of participation focused on directly engaging grassroots Roma women. This requires thinking first about the women's needs and their personal and family situations. This involves flexibility, but not at the expense of risking the activity's goals. For instance, instead of asking Roma women to come to the association's headquarters for an activity, by organizing the gatherings in the neighborhoods where there are Roma people, local women are invited to be part of the organization of the event. This way of working requires planning the student gatherings with enough time before they occur, as a substantial amount of mobilization, support and participation take place since social agents from the territory are involved in the events.

The engagement of Roma women in the student gatherings occurs in multiple ways. As already mentioned, each gathering has a 'chairing committee' that is in charge of the local organization of the event and receives the support of DKM from the beginning of the activity until the end. Most of the time, this committee is composed of women who have never organized an activity of this kind. During

the period of organization of the event, there are intense 'agitation' activities, first in the neighborhood where the gathering will take place as different stakeholders are contacted as well as among other Roma communities around the Catalan territory, where dissemination activities are carried out, including discussion of the selected topic for the gathering and arrangement of the logistics to enable women and girls from different territories to attend.

Sulamita, a Roma woman who collaborated with DKM in the organization of the gathering in Sant Cosme in 2007, explained how the organizing of the activity started much earlier than the day it took place. This was needed to involve as many Roma women from the neighborhood as possible:

I remember getting ready, going there, and starting to interact with the rest of the mothers, little girls, local Roma women; it was somehow a slow process until the day when the gathering took place. It was a great gathering, plenty of new situations, a lot of participants ... And in a neighborhood that was not near DKM's headquarters, with a lot of new faces ... many role models ... (Sulamita, Roma woman)

Assumpta also explained how, together with other women who participated in the organization of the event, they contacted different stakeholders in the neighborhood. She emphasized that she had never participated in organizing an event of its type:

( ... ) We have to do more gatherings. They helped us very much ... We asked shops in the neighborhood to help us. The supermarket, the bakery. DKM assumed things, and it was a success ( ... ) I had never been in something like that ... (Assumpta, Roma woman)

Other women engage in the gathering acting as rapporteurs in the small groups for debate. Eva, who participated in the gathering in Campclar with her cousins, explained how excited she was when she was invited to act as rapporteur for the discussion group in which she participated:

And then, the day that I went to the Roma women gathering, she (a member of DKM) told me, "Take the computer and take notes about everything that is being said" (Eva, Roma woman)

Petra, a Romanian Roma woman member of DKM who was involved in the organization of the gathering of Figueras, recounted a very vivid memory of this event. She stressed that what she liked most about the gathering celebrated in Figueras was the passion with which the local women from the neighborhood organized it:

I loved our last meeting in Figueras; I did love it since it was organized by local women in Figueras. It was great the way they did it ... We went there, we gave our support, we organized it from Drom too, but we empowered the other women from the local territory to do it. (Petra, Romanian Roma woman member of DKM)

Many Roma women in Catalonia have now participated in Roma Women Students' Gathering in Sant Cosme, El Prat, Terrassa, Besós, Gracia, Bon Pastor, La Mina, Reus, Terrassa, and other Catalan cities and neighborhoods. Many women attend to them year after year being, as they are the women who must agitate in their own territories and recruit other women to participate. As Georgina explained, in the case of non-Roma women who are also members of DKM, the association is just in charge of "making waves" and generating public debate in a territory, working alongside the community:

The job of Drom is not going there on a daily basis and having a mediator working every day or taking the children to school every day. Its role is just making waves, agitating the territory. Generating public debate in the territory, generating positive expectations with respect to Roma people, and thereafter, they do that themselves; after those interactions, they wish to change everything ( ... ). (Georgina, non-Romani woman member of DKM)

Georgina's description is consistent with what Carmen said about the organization of the gatherings in the different neighborhoods with local Roma women later having a substantial impact on the territories, thus triggering their own mobilizations:

Organizing the gatherings in different districts was, on the one hand, a result of their calling us, but now, it has also helped to organize things in the mentioned district. Then, as a result of that gathering, there were women who actually got hooked into it ( ... ) And since we had no problem whatsoever, no fights, no pride, we said, "We Drom will organize it" ... because what we were actually doing was for those women, those ones in the district ... So two or three of us sat down with them and asked, "So, how do you want to do it?" And by doing this, we achieved high involvement; this would not be possible otherwise ... (Carmen, Roma woman DKM member woman)

As observed, holding the gatherings in neighborhoods where there are large Roma populations but where associational life is scarce plants the seeds for Roma women to join mobilizations, to engage in existing public spaces in which they can discuss and share their common problems, and organize together to contest them. Many Roma women deserve to participate in spaces of decision-making. However, many times, asymmetric power relations between Roma and non-Roma people and the fact that public institutions are often constructed as ethnicity-blind spaces become a barrier for Roma women to engage [50,51]. The gatherings become a space tailored to women and in which non-academic women are the protagonists. Sulamita's explanation showed a core strategic element of the student gatherings: going to territories in which Roma women have remained at the margins and in which the celebration of the gathering would introduce a way to promote the Roma women's movement at the grassroots level:

We had a meeting, and it was decided that it should take place in Sant Cosme ... I think Sant Cosme was mentioned because at that time, there weren't any Roma organization working in that territory, nor any educational organizations, nobody was there ... (referring to social entities). I think that this was the reason why we decided to do it there, to promote some type of social movement there ... to promote youth to engage so that the Roma people would step forward and create their own entity. And, incidentally, I believe that then something came up there with some women ... What I can't remember is if at the end, those women organized formally or not (creating some type of Roma women's organization), but the core idea was this one ... We moved something inside those people ( ... ) (Sulamita, Roma woman)

At some of the gatherings, the atmosphere of mobilization in the territories created by the local Roma women in co-organizing the event with the support provided by DKM has triggered the creation of new local Roma women's associations. This was the case for the Shine Association of Roma Women (pseudonym), located in a mainly Roma-inhabited neighborhood in the province of Tarragona. DKM members guided members of Shine during its process of creation, assessing and supporting them in the different tasks needed to be formally established as a social association.

Angeles and Coral, founder members of the Shine Association of Roma Women, explained that when a gathering was held in their neighborhood in 2009, they had not been formally constituted as an organization. As they described, although they faced substantial resistance mainly from leaders of the oldest existing Roma association in the city, DKM members supported them to create their own Roma women-led association. Shine did not want to compete with the established Roma association from the city; their aim was to act as a loudspeaker of grassroots Roma women in their neighborhood and to work to promote more educational and labor opportunities for them.

Esther, who participated in the later constitution process of Shine Association, explained how organizing the gathering in the neighborhood was the triggering event that empowered members of Shine to make them feel that they could do it. However, although they did it for a short time, resistance from the established Roma association from the city prevented them from further succeeding in their endeavors.



I think that what promoted the creation of the association was celebrating the gatherings in the neighborhood because it was formally constituted two months after it. And I totally understand it . . . ! Those women who participate in a gathering get the strength and energy to do whatever they propose! You are there, doing everything, getting new ideas, seeing how people collaborate! (Esther, Roma women member of DKM)

Through the Roma women student gathering, women work at the grassroots level to empower poor Roma women in their own communities and to create the conditions for them to activate networks of solidarity. In turn, in some cases, these networks of solidarity among the women themselves and with other social actors that were already organized, such as DKM members and other stakeholders operating at the grassroots level, plant the seeds for grassroots associations to emerge. When such processes occur, women who used to be in the shadows are empowered to take the lead and join existing efforts to work to create more social, economic, and cultural opportunities for themselves and the people from their territories.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

The case study analyzed in this article, that is, the ‘Roma women student gatherings’ (known as ‘Trobades’ in Catalan), constitutes a specific example of how Roma women are organizing at the grassroots level. The traits and impacts of this activity have been presented and discussed, showing how through engagement in the student gatherings, many grassroots Roma women find a path through which to deploy their human agency in an individual and collective way, first embracing formal education projects for then moving forward to the formal labor market.

First, the analysis revealed the potential of the “public narratives”, to use Ganz’s term, in the gatherings to be a call to action [46,52]. The public narratives crafted and shared in the student gatherings by Roma women are shaped by two elements. First, the traits of the Roma culture and the meaning it has for women, such as the importance of the extended family, motherhood, and respect for and authority of elders. Second, a call to empower Roma women to unite and struggle for their rights as individuals and as an ethnic minority group which has been systematically excluded from participating in mainstream public spaces of debate and decision-making, and to not hide their cultural identity but embrace it, experience it as a benefit, and feel proud of it. The statement of one of the Roma girls who participated as role model in a gathering, presented in the previous section, highlighted the following: “Education does not make you less Roma, but more”. Hence, it is through this shared value that Roma women are able to link the ‘story of the self’ (their personal stories and values that call them to action), the ‘story of the us’ (stories that communicate the values shared with the other Roma women taking action) and the ‘story of the now’ (stories that express the urgency of acting now). Ganz’s contributions about the relevance of shared public narratives for social movements and organization helps to understand the reactions of Roma women who participate in the gatherings and engaged with the stories of the role models: women who participate in the student gathering do not feel distant from what the role models explain. On the contrary, they both share similar problems and have lived similar experiences of triple discrimination because of being women, poor, and Roma [1].

In the Roma women student gatherings, women find a space in which they can contest the assumptions (i.e., that “Roma don’t like and don’t want education”) which them and their children have been victims of. These assumptions are generated by an educational system that are still implementing segregationist and exclusionary practices. Indeed, some of these practices, which have been already analyzed by existing literature [22,32], have been denounced by the Roma community. For instance, both early tracking and segregation by the streaming of Roma children into lower performance tracks are two of the most identified types of segregation that Roma students are still suffering in Spain and in Europe. These interventions do not only lead to stigmatization of cultural minorities but also to low educational expectations among this community. Moreover, this has an impact at a later stage, since it negatively affects their academic outcomes and increases their chances of early school dropout. As aforementioned, the Roma identity is still invisible within the Spanish

educational system and academic curriculum, neither the history nor the values of the Roma culture are contemplated in these. Another aspect that reflects this invisibility of the Roma identity is the very scarce presence of educational agents of Roma origin within the schools centers (e.g., teachers, staff in other positions); a situation that is slowly changing. Roma students are also underrepresented in higher education. Eventually, these are some of the underlying elements that explain in which ways the educational system itself is the one which ends up expelling Roma students [4,22].

The Roma women students' gathering become a space where participant women speak up about the above-mentioned situations, acknowledging through egalitarian dialogue that pursuing higher education should not be perceived or posed as a choice between keeping their cultural identity or accessing higher education. In contrast, consistent with what the previous literature has shown for ethnic minority students, including Roma [49,53–55], Roma students' access to higher education broadens rather than displaces their Roma identity.

The narratives of women presented in the previous analysis evidence what some literature has already denounced [4,22,37], i.e., the fact that educational institutions are often constructed as spaces largely blind to ethnic diversity. However, the analysis reveals that the gatherings are an example of how Roma women are finding ways to escape the risks provoked by reflexive modernization [10], which challenges the core community, family, and even equality principles that underpin Roma culture. Through egalitarian dialogues, women and girls exchange their views about issues of their concern, agreeing on the fact that they can live in modernity according to their own cultural values and without conforming to any norm as a result of its imposition, but rather as the result of an individual, free decision.

Second, the evidence presented has also shown that by participating in the gatherings, Roma women generate new educational expectations that they did not have in the past. This encourages them to embrace new educational projects and to follow role models that they can look up to. Drawing on Mead's symbolic interactionism [56], in spaces such as the gatherings, Roma girls and women shape new versions of 'me', including transformative interactions to portray themselves as women with a decisive capacity for decision-making, action, and contesting existing social stereotypes that have long existed regarding the Roma, such as the stereotypes mentioned above. Therefore, the gatherings also emerge as sites in which the lifeworlds of the Roma women and girls are deeply reinforced: their cultural identity is not negotiated but valued.

Finally, the gatherings become a space where Roma women not only deploy their human agency but also organize. By being involved in the organization of gatherings, local women mobilize, become protagonists, and assume roles that make them visible in the public sphere as a collective actor. In this vein, they are in charge of identifying and contacting stakeholders at the grassroots level to support the events, building alliances with them, and once the event is finished, committing themselves in the advocacy for their rights as Roma women and the ones of the Roma community. This leads many of them to join other organized actors on the ground, working not solely in the field of education to contest and transform segregationist practices within schools, but also in other spheres such as labor market, health or social and political participation. In the territories where the gatherings are organized, associational life among the Roma and among Roma women is articulated. Moreover, in some cases, women who were once in the shadows of public spaces in their communities become community leaders. At the end of the events, the motivation of these women is often manifested in new collective action at the grassroots level, relying on the support of Drom Kotar Mestipen to give orientation as needed.

The evidence collected shows how Roma women are shaping a Roma women's movement that vindicates a dialogic feminism, which in some aspects is in line with the dialogic feminism led by 'the other women' [2,18], and a feminism that should be inclusive of everybody [57]. This Roma women's movement started in the neighborhoods, not as a project by a leader but as a movement feeding on the stories of many Roma girls and women, such as those described above, who are already bravely challenging stereotypes about the Roma.

Overall, the relevance and contribution of the case studied in the present article can be read in light of two major aspects, i.e., the social and theoretical aspects. On the one hand, the social relevance of the Roma women student gatherings comes from their impact on the lives of Roma girls and women and their encouragement of Roma people to continue advancing in writing a collective story that is about pride and respect for their cultural identity while struggling for their access to quality education, employment, and public spaces of debate and decision-making along with other feminist women. As social psychologist Bruner explained, “we become the autobiographical narratives by which we ‘tell about’ our lives” [58] (p. 694). Related to this, the case analyzed explicates how Roma women engaged in the student gatherings articulate autobiographical narratives that are not drawn within the boundaries of marginalization and poverty but explicated within the realm of their fight for and accomplishment of their rights based on stories of self and collective transformation. In this sense, the Roma women are empowered women who contest prejudices, assume new challenges, and fight to participate in spaces of debate and decision-making as both women and Roma. On the other hand, the theoretical relevance of the case study of the Roma women student gatherings relies on the evidence it provides of the importance of doing research ‘with’ the Roma and not ‘on’ the Roma [22]. The spaces where social change is currently occurring can be captured and studied only by using transformative theoretical lenses in the analysis of the social realities of the most vulnerable. When doing so, the sociological imagination of researchers examining the social reality of the Roma not only depicts stories of exclusion and marginalization but also takes into account a Roma daily life in which there are social actors collectively working to transform their realities.

In all, this article is limited to the study of the Roma-women student gathering as a tiny example of what is going on ‘on the ground’, in the very ‘barrios’. Thus, this article presents a bottom-up communicative analysis of how agency is enhanced and promoted. However, much could be explained about how these particular events influence on other societal spheres, such as the political, economic, and cultural ones, looking specifically at both the extent and constraints in which these actions at the grassroots level are able to contest unequal power relations and seize sites of power at the institutional level in a collective way. It is our deep wish to delve into these avenues in future works.

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